



Office of the Bishop

“In the Sacred Heart every treasure of wisdom and knowledge is hidden. In that Divine Heart beats God’s infinite love for everyone, for each one of us individually.” – St. John Paul II

“Make my heart like unto Thine”

Pastoral Letter for the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We live in a culture that prizes personal autonomy. “It’s my life, I can do what I want with it”, “I will look out for myself”, “Love is love”, “Do whatever feels good”. We think that the things that this world offers, like power, wealth, honour, and pleasure will make us happy. But in truth, none of it satisfies the deepest longings of our hearts. We were made for more than the things of this world. Our finite hearts are made for infinite Love.

We are made for union with God. He wants to share his life with us – a life in abundance – that’s why he loves us and constantly draws us to himself. Each person is created in the image and likeness of God, redeemed by Jesus Christ, and destined for eternal life (c.f. [Dignitas Infinita](#), par.1, April 2024). In this, we find our greatest dignity as sons and daughters of God wonderfully created out of love, to love and to be loved. We become truly fulfilled and come to understand ourselves by loving God and loving one another sacrificially.

God is love – and his love impels us to love one another as he loves. Jesus reveals this in his sacrificial love by dying on the Cross and rising from the dead so that we might have eternal life in union with God. He sent the Holy Spirit to be our Advocate and strengthen us on our pilgrim journey of life. He gave us his Mother to intercede for us. He gave us the sacraments through the Church to feed our souls and sanctify us, and the inheritance of the riches of the Kingdom of God. This is what motivates us to be a living Gospel and witness to the love of God – because God loved us first (1 John 4:19).

An encounter with God’s love and mercy changes lives; it is what leads to a decision to make a response to follow the One who has laid down his life for us. This is the transforming power of the Gospel. God loves us where we are, but he loves us too much to leave us there. He always meets us where we are, but he does not celebrate sin. He desires to save us from sin and death. He meets us in our darkness to bring us into his light, just as he did for the adulterous woman in the scriptures – “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (John 8:11).

God's love is real and personal. In the midst of our darkness, he reveals his heart – a human heart filled with divine love. In a time where God was often perceived as harsh, cruel, cold, angry and demanding, God revealed the tenderness and mercy of his heart to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690) with the desire that the whole world would come to know his immense merciful love through his Son Jesus who redeems sinful humanity, calls us to repentance, and invites us to embrace a life of holiness empowered by his grace.

During one of these apparitions, St. Margaret Mary Alacoque reported that Jesus wanted to be honoured under the figure of his Heart and flesh. He asked the faithful to receive him in the Eucharist frequently, especially on the first Friday of the month, and to adore him in the Blessed Sacrament. Devotion to the Sacred Heart reminds us that God is close to us at every moment and in every situation. The rich symbolism of the image of the Sacred Heart serves as a road map guiding us deeper into the love to which we are called.

Heart – Jesus “has loved us all with a human heart. For this reason, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation, ‘is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that. . . love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings’ without exception” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 478). There is always a need for renewed encounters with the deep and undying love of Jesus in his Sacred Heart.

Crown of Thorns – Like Jesus’ heart, our hearts are often wounded for the sake of love. Real love can lead to rejection and suffering. Jesus shows us that true love suffers. This is the cost of discipleship. If love does not cost us something, it is not real. We must never forget that Jesus sees and knows our suffering, and journeys with us. His heart is wounded for love of us.

The Cross – Contrary to what our culture advocates, love is not just about feelings. It involves a decision to love even when we do not always feel like loving through a selfless commitment by our actions to show to others the love that Jesus shows to us (cf. Cardinal Collins, [Heart Speaks to Heart](#), 2021). True love leads us to sacrifice for God and others. It transforms suffering into sacrifice. In imitation of Christ, it involves looking to the needs of the other person before our own needs. Jesus shows us this by his sacrifice on the cross. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). No where is this more tangible than in the Eucharist, the Sacrament of love, where Jesus gazes into our eyes with a love that penetrates our souls. Just as Jesus gave himself to us on the Cross at Calvary, the singular event which is re-presented for us in every Mass as the Memorial of his love, we in turn express our love by abandoning ourselves completely to God’s will, serving and loving Jesus in others.

Fire – The Sacred Heart of Jesus burns with unending love for YOU. The Holy Spirit is the fire of God’s love made manifest in Jesus’ heart and in the hearts of his disciples who share his life. In receiving the Holy Spirit, the promise of Jesus to journey with us in this life, we too come to know his presence, saying with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, “did not our hearts burn within us?” Whenever we feel spiritually fatigued, experience spiritual dryness, feel battle-worn, or become discouraged, we need to return to that first Love that sets our hearts on fire once more. We need to take the time every day to let God speak to our hearts in prayer, fill them with the fire of his love, and be reminded of how much he delights in us.

Priests in a particular way embrace the vocation to love the people of God with the heart of Jesus. Because of this, the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus is also the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests. I ask that you remember our priests as they work diligently, praying that the Lord

will strengthen them in his love and give them hearts after the Shepherd's own heart. We pray also for seminarians and those discerning a vocation to the priesthood.

To the heart that is lonely, to the heart that is confused, to the heart that is grieved, to the heart that is angry, to the heart that feels rejected, to the heart that is despairing, I say, you are seen, you are known, and you are loved in your heart of hearts. May the Sacred Heart of Jesus aflame with love for you draw you more deeply into his heart, transform you more into his likeness, and fill you with his abundant joy.

"Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto Thine."

In the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christian Riesbeck". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

✠ Christian Riesbeck, CC
Bishop of Saint John

June 7, 2024